

128 "Father, forgive them"

Last week we saw that our God-given responsibility to forgive one another applies when that forgiveness is sought; and until it is sought, the wrongdoing remains unaddressed and the relationship between the parties remains impaired. This is the principle by which God forgives any of us: Christ has paid our debts Himself, so God the Father's forgiveness is "in place" and ready to flow, and it does flow when we seek that forgiveness.

But a problem with this principle seems to arise when we read Jesus' words, in Luke 23.34, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do". Isn't Jesus granting forgiveness here, for a wicked deed, before forgiveness has been sought? - so perhaps we should all be doing the same? Just what is the Lord showing us by His prayer for His killers' forgiveness?

Jesus is certainly praying for God's mercy on His enemies, just as Stephen did before his own death (Acts 7.60), and He expects us to do the same: to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, to do good to those who hate us, and to pray for those who abuse us and persecute us (eg., Matthew 5.43-44). Now none of this is remotely easy! - for it runs so deeply against the grain of our inbuilt sense of justice. But that is our calling, and as we yield to the Holy Spirit dwelling within our lives (eg., Romans 8) we can make progress even in this.

But we notice that Jesus Himself is not forgiving anyone in this, His prayer from the cross. In one vital sense, the wrongness coming His way is really not His problem but the Father's. So Jesus hands over not just Himself, but the whole scenario to His Father to sort out. In this handing-over, He graciously prays for those who are killing Him, asking that the Father will grant His forgiveness because they are acting in ignorance.

So what is set before us here is a supreme example of Jesus' total, faithful surrender to His Father, and His deep, loving concern for the fate of His enemies - two strong lessons for us in our own discipleship.

For Jesus on that cross knew full well that He was being asked by His Father to play a vital part in a much greater drama - no less than the Father's supreme act of mercy in opening the way back to Himself, the Creator, for His fallen creation. It is simply because Jesus WAS being put to death, so foully and so undeservedly, that the Father's forgiveness would then be ABLE to flow when it was sought. This is why Jesus offered Himself in obedience and surrender to His

Father, and this is why He shrieked in appalling agony, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?", as the world's sins were placed on His shoulders and His Father turned His back. The Father put Jesus through all this horror for our sakes, to make possible His forgiveness of us poor sinners, and to bring us back to Himself. That is the Gospel, won at such fearful cost, for us.

So where have we got to over forgiveness? We are to forgive without delay when forgiveness is sought from us; for we ourselves daily seek, and receive without delay, forgiveness from the Father through our faith in Jesus Christ (eg., I John 1.9). Meanwhile we are to do our best to "love our enemies", how ever their enmity towards us may be expressed; and part of that loving is to pray that God the Father will forgive them, for they are sinners just like us, and their wrongdoings are actually far more against Him than against us.

And on what grounds will the Father forgive them? On the same grounds that He forgives anyone else - the shed blood of His Son Jesus Christ, no more, no less. And when will His forgiveness flow? When His forgiveness is sought, by repentant sinners, whose faith is placed in the Person, the Name and the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Almighty God has done all that was necessary to put us right with Himself once more. We simply have to ask that the blessings He has won for us all through Christ may now apply - to us.

(Some texts to ponder should you wish concerning forgiveness, reconciliation and salvation: John 3.14-18 / John 14.6 / Acts 4.12 / Romans 5.6-11 / I Timothy 2.5-6).

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